

Dementia: Facts to remember

Dementia is poised to become Australia's number one health issue in the next two decades with the number of people affected expected to reach the half-million mark by 2040.¹ Currently, more than 160, 000 Australians have dementia,¹ including more than one-in-four people over the age of 85.²

What is dementia?

Dementia is an incurable, progressive and disabling condition, primarily of older persons that causes irreversible brain damage.

The condition is caused by a number of diseases which can impair memory, thinking, orientation, comprehension, language, judgement, emotional control and social behaviour. The most common are outlined below:

- Alzheimer's disease (AD).
- Vascular dementia (VaD).
- Dementia with Lewy bodies (DLB).
- Fronto-temporal [lobe] dementia (FTD).

Dementia is the fourth biggest killer of adults after heart disease, cancer and stroke.³

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms vary and the condition progresses at a different rate according to the areas of the brain affected. Disease progression is categorised as mild (early stage), moderate (middle stage) and severe or advanced (late stage), before the person dies. Early phase symptoms can be subtle, and may include:

- Persistent and frequent memory difficulties (especially of recent events), often associated with personality change (such as aggression or obsessiveness).
- Vagueness in everyday conversation.
- Apparent loss of enthusiasm for activities.
- Taking longer to do routine tasks.

As the disease progresses, changes become more dramatic, and can include loss of memory of well-learned information and skills (how to dress, eat, walk and when to sleep), physical symptoms such as weight loss and incontinence, and hallucinations or misinterpretations.

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Is dementia the same as being forgetful?

'Normal' adult forgetfulness can be associated with memory and concentration lapses or slow recall. However, for people experiencing dementia, forgetfulness is persistent, progressive and disruptive, and is usually accompanied by other symptoms.

For example, someone forgetting what they came into a room to get is 'normal' adult forgetfulness, but losing their car keys and then finding them but not remembering what they are for, is a sign of dementia.

Who gets dementia?

The majority of people with dementia are older, with approximately 50 per cent of people in their nineties having the condition .⁴ However, it is not just older people who develop dementia in old age with more than 6,600 Australians aged under 65 experiencing 'young onset' dementia.⁵

Other risk factors include:

- Being the first degree relative (i.e. child, brother or sister) of someone who has been diagnosed with dementia.
- Suffering cardiovascular health conditions (such as high blood pressure, narrowing of the arteries and irregular heart beat).
- Having suffered head trauma with loss of consciousness.

Diagnosis and treatment

There is no single test to identify dementia. Diagnosis and appropriate care assessment are decided after careful clinical consultation and community evaluation of the person's medical state, cognitive abilities, functional skills and deficits, and social support and stresses.

Current drug therapies (e.g. cholinesterase inhibitors (CEIs)) do not stop the progression of dementia but may stall the development of the condition.

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References:

1. Access Economics Report, *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia* May 2003, page iii and iv.
2. Access Economics Report, *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia* May 2003, page 32.
3. Access Economics Report, *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia* May 2003, page 9.
4. Access Economics Report, *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia* May 2003, page 7.
5. Access Economics Report, *The Dementia Epidemic: Economic impact and positive solutions for Australia* May 2003, page iv.